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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MINSK 000508

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SUBJECT: THE SURVEY SAYS SUPPORT FOR LUKASHENKO STILL HIGH

REF: MINSK 182

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Independent pollster Oleg Manayev presented post the results of the latest IISEPS survey conducted May 5-15. Aleksandr Lukashenko's rating fell slightly, although support for opposition leaders remained low. Manayev's findings suggest public openness to an opposition and support for negotiations between the opposition and the regime. Positive feelings toward the EU run strong and a majority of Belarusians back proposals for democratic reform put forward by the EU and under the auspices of the OSCE. The possible release of political prisoners divides the public. End summary.

Tarnished Lukashenko Still the Fairest of Them All

¶2. (C) Manaev stated the slight fall in Lukashenko's popularity to below 50 percent, while not statistically significant, bore out a latent sense among respondents that something is wrong in Belarus. Three out of five respondents said Lukashenko's position had fallen or remained the same since his fraudulent re-election in 2006. More of those surveyed believed that authorities represented the interests of bureaucrats and the rich than of average people or the poor. Over two-thirds of Belarusians thought they had no influence on decision-makers. A majority of respondents thought it unlikely that the government could notably reduce bureaucracy or corruption in the next few years. Concerns over illness, while always high, skyrocketed. Those whose economic well-being declined in the last three months slightly outnumbered those reporting an improvement. Economic expectations for the future were mixed.

"If tomorrow there were a presidential election, whom would you vote for?"

		May	January (reftel)
Lukashenko	49.7	50.9	
Milinkevich	12.7	11.4	
Kozulin		4.4	4.2
Gaydukevich	1.4	1.2	

"In your view, whose interests do the present authorities uphold?" (more than one answer possible)

Those of ...		
Officials and bureaucrats	43.4	
People like me		33.9
The poor and socially marginal	23.0	
The rich		20.7
Russia		4.8

The West	2.2
No Answer	9.3

Do you think the opinion of people like you influences political and socio-economic decisions in our country?

No	67.9
Yes	27.1
No Answer	5.0

From your point of view, how likely are the following events in Belarus in the next two to three years?

Likely?	Yes	No
A noticeable drop in corruption	40.6	50.0
A noticeable drop in bureaucracy	36.9	53.3
The country maintains stability	65.5	21.9
Another conflict with Russia	62.8	20.0
A solution for energy security	51.6	34.2
Collapse of the Belarusian ruble	38.7	40.0
Groundbreaking for a nuclear plant	65.1	20.7
Belarus pumps Venezuelan oil	41.6	31.5
Honest and transparent privatization	29.0	49.6
Housing prices stop rising	18.8	62.4

What do you worry about today most of all? (more than one answer possible)

Loss of health	73.5
Indigence	40.8
Loss of work	33.1
Crime	24.5
Arbitrary rule	19.7
Civil war	12.6
Foreign Aggression	11.2
Loss of Belarusian Independence	8.9
Something else	2.7

MINSK 00000508 002 OF 004

"How has your material situation changed in the last three months?"

Improved	14.6
No change	66.3
Worsened	17.7
No answer	1.4

"And how, in your view, will the socio-economic situation in Belarus change in the coming years?"

Improve	26.7
Will not change	42.2
Worsen	22.8
No answer	8.3

Church, Army and Dictator Still Have Public's Trust

14. (SBU) Trust in President Lukashenko remains high, although the public distrusts several institutions headed by his appointees. Independent media fared very well given the limited number of people with regular access to unofficial new sources. Political parties of all stripes were among the least trusted institutions.

Do you trust the following government and social institutions? (selected answers)

	Yes	No
Orthodox Church	68.6	21.2
Army	60.4	30.2
President	56.9	32.7
Independent research centers	50.4	29.6
Independent media	50.6	35.5
State media	51.0	39.7
Independent trade unions	42.0	37.8
International organizations	42.2	38.8
Central Election Commission	43.5	44.1
KGB	41.1	43.6
Pro-government trade unions	38.6	43.8
Police	41.5	49.4

City Executive Committees	37.9	51.1
Pro-government parties	30.1	51.4
Opposition political parties	19.9	62.5

Public Wants an Opposition, Just a Different One

15. (SBU) Only 29.6 percent of those surveyed answered no when asked whether there should be an opposition. However, over two-thirds of respondents would not pick a current politician if asked to vote for a leader of the United Democratic Forces.

"If you were a delegate at the Congress of Democratic Forces of Belarus, then who would you support for leader of the United Democratic Forces?"

Former presidential candidate Milinkevich	14.4	
United Civic Party Chair Lebedko	5.6	
Former presidential candidate Kozulin	5.1	
Party of Communists First Secretary Kalyakin	3.5	
A different Belarusian politician	2.9	
No one		46.3
Don't Know/No Answer	22.2	

Opposition Strategy Gets Favorable Response

16. (SBU) The opposition coalition's newly approved strategy of trying to force the regime to come to the negotiating table was favored by almost half of Belarusians.

"Many in our country and abroad consider that the Belarusian authorities should begin talks not just with the EU, but with the opposition. With which statement do you agree?"

Talks with the opposition are necessary because that is the only way to come to agreement and take into account different interests in our society. 48.6.

Such talks are useless because the opposition doesn't represent anyone and authorities don't have anything to discuss. 21.5.

Such talks are useless because the opposition should make the government uphold the law, not enter into dialogue when authorities break the law and abuse human rights. 17.9

Don't know/No answer 12.0

Isolationist Mood Prevails, But Pro-EU Feelings Strong

MINSK 00000508 003 OF 004

17. (C) Manayev saw as particularly noteworthy that two-fifths of respondents believed Belarus should not have a special relationship with Russia. Attitudes toward Europe were generally positive even though a majority of respondents failed to recognize the significant improvement in living standards in countries that joined the EU in 2004. Constant negative state propaganda has damaged the image of the United States.

"What type of integration between Belarus and Russia do you prefer?"

Belarus and Russia should form a union of independent states with close political and economic relations: 43.5

Belarus and Russia should become one state with a single president, cabinet, army, flag, currency, etc.: 8.3

Relations between Belarus and Russia should be just like between any other countries within the CIS: 41.6

"With what words do you most strongly associate Europe?"
(more than one response possible)

Well-being	55.5
Democracy	40.1
Freedom	30.5
Rule of law	14.1
Justice	13.3
Degradation	10.6
Peace-loving	6.6
Other	2.7
No answer	10.4

"On May 1, 2004, 10 countries joined the EU, including Belarus' neighbors - Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. In your view, how have the lives of citizens of these three countries changed since then?

They have started to live better	27.4
They live like they did before	33.3
They have started to live worse	18.0
Don't know/no answer	21.3

"With which countries do you think Belarus should establish closer relations?" (more than one answer possible)

Russia	58.6
EU	44.5
CIS	35.2
Iran, Venezuela, etc.	19.0
China	14.7
Arab countries	9.7
United States	8.5
Don't know/no answer	7.7

Linking Demands to OSCE/EU points Meets Support

18. (SBU) Two-thirds of respondents support most demands of Belarus made by the opposition during talks sponsored by the OSCE. The only demand receiving somewhat less support may have failed to resonate with the public because it included the term "the opposition." Reaction to the EU's 12 points was more mixed, but only the call to ban the death penalty failed to garner majority support. Nine of the 12 points were supported by between 72 and 85 percent of respondents. More evenly split results are presented below.

"Do you support demands made several years ago by opposition parties in talks with Belarusian authorities that took place under the auspices of the OSCE?"

"Amend the electoral code to allow for free and fair elections."

Support? Yes: 70.5, No: 17.1, Don't know: 12.4

"Amend parliament's authority so that laws it passed must be followed by all parts of government."

Support? Yes: 68.5, No: 16.5, Don't know: 15.0

"Cease the persecution of people who disagree with the current political course."

Support? Yes: 65.9, No: 22.0, Don't know: 12.1

"Offer the opposition access to state media, including television."

Support? Yes: 57.1, No: 31.6, Don't know: 11.3

Support for Political Prisoners Mixed

MINSK 00000508 004 OF 004

19. (SBU) Support for Kozulin and other political prisoners went beyond solid opposition supporters. Perhaps not surprisingly, a sizable portion of the population was unconcerned about the existence of political prisoners.

"At the end of 2006 the EU developed a new package of proposals for Belarus which called for assistance to increase

living standards in the country in return for democratic reforms. Which of the proposals should be fulfilled in order for citizens to receive assistance?

Free all political prisoners: Fulfill: 51.9, Not: 32.3

"Last year former Belarus State University rector and presidential candidate Kozulin was sentenced to five years in prison for "hooliganism, organizing and participated in gang activities and disturbing the public order." Many international organizations, the EU and the United States consider him a political prisoner and insist upon his release. Belarusian authorities do not agree, considering him a criminal. What do you think?

Convicted on political charges and should be released

34.9

Convicted justly and should serve out his sentence 25.0

I don't care

31.1

Don't know/no answer

9.0

Comment: An Uphill Battle that Democrats Can Win?

[10](#). (C) Uncertainty over the economy and pessimism about the direction of the country could provide means to draw further support away from Lukashenko, although the third of the population opposing the release of political prisoners seems a lost cause. The fact that at least the majority support the existence of an opposition is encouraging. The opposition's new focus on forcing the regime to negotiate and pushing European values appears well suited to grow support for the democratic coalition.
Stewart